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ABSTRACT

Recent publications and articles that have received national attention focus on the problems that face higher education as well as allegations that American colleges and universities were "failing to give students an adequate general education." The critics are correct and considerable energy is being directed to returning higher education to its traditional path. Examples should be found of library participation in curriculum review. Indeed librarians should vigorously support efforts to curb the discredited marketplace philosophy of education. (Author)

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Curriculum Change:

Transitions in Time

Idea Brief

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Abstract

Recent publications and articles that have received national attention focus on the problems that face higher education as well as allegations that American colleges and universities were "failing to give students an adequate general education". The critics are correct and considerable energy is being directed to returning higher education to its traditional path. Examples should be found of library participation in curriculum review. Indeed librarians should vigorously support efforts to curb the discredited marketplace philosophy of education.

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Curriculum Change:

Transitions in Time

> In the Twelfth Century the French Grammarian and Philosopher Bernard of Chartres wrote: we are like dwarfs seated on the shoulders of giants; we see more things than the ancients and things more distant, but this is due neither to the sharpness of our sight nor to the greatness of our stature, but because we are raised and borne aloft on that giant mass.[1]

This "giant mass" is all our history, our literature, our theologies, our political ideals, our slogans, values, ideas, and habits of thought. In short, the study of our western heritage to better understand and appreciate all knowledge was, until recently, the matrix and the norm of an education for life.

In the 1980's, however, dwarfs do not sit on giant's shoulders. Liberal education and the educational values it represents have been replaced by a curriculum given to a marketplace philosophy. It is a supermarket where students are shoppers and professors are merchants of learning. Fads and fashions, the demands of popularity and success enter where wisdom and experience should prevail. The marketplace philosophy refuses to establish common expectations and norms. General education, education for life, lacks a rationale and cohesion.

Curriculum Change:

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The educational failures of the United States are emerging as a major concern of the 1980's. The theme of this conference, Energies for Transition, suggests change and adaptation -- and implies it will require effort. These energies are to be applied to transitions that we recognize. The abundance of reports (for example the National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk; the National Endowment for the Humanities, To Reclaim a Legacy; and the Association of American Colleges, Integrity in the College Curriculum, that diagnose and prescribe for our colleges, the urgency with which they are argued, the evidence they summon, and the analysis that they offer are persuasive evidence there is a profound crisis.[2]

What energies have colleges brought to bear on this crisis, and how can we in the Library world respond? A recent American Council on Education Report says that six in ten U.S. colleges are reviewing the quality of their curricula by focusing on general education requirements and the communication skills that graduates should possess.[3] In a recent New York Times article representatives of some twenty selected colleges and universities were questioned to see what curriculum change meant to them.[4] Based on that article, questionnaires were sent to librarians inquiring to

what extent they have influenced the curricular change and what changes, if any, have resulted in library service. The answers ranged from "no influence -- no change" to "some influence -- considerable change". In my own library's case, where planning for curriculum change went on for four years and was implemented in September of 1985, a librarian served on the committee overseeing the complete review of the entire curriculum. A librarian was appointed to lead a committee that assisted each department head to bring the requirements for the program for their majors in line with committee-stated guidelines. A librarian serves on each twelve person team that directs the most exciting innovation -- an integrated group of courses and activities that feature librarian-led common readings and a capstone seminar with librarians participating. Finally, a library friends group is raising $125,000 to match an NEH Challenge Grant that will provide an endowment for materials to support this innovation.

Curriculum reform and efforts to move teaching and learning to a more traditional model clearly has a role for librarians. We must support efforts to create firmer means of education and involve our energies to support excellence. We must recognize and support those curricular reforms which will make our libraries the giants that support the shoulders of learning.

References

[1]The Metalogicon of John of Salisburg; A twelfth-century defense of the verbal and logical arts of the trivium, III, 4, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1955), p. 167.

[2]See National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1983). Other recent studies include that of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education entitled "Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education," Chronicle of Higher Education, v. 29, no. 9 (Oct. 24, 1984), p. 35-49; the National Endowment for the Humanities Study Group on the State of Learning in the Humanities "To Reclaim A Legacy", Ibid, v. 29, no. 14 (Nov. 28, 1984), p. 16-21; and the Association of American Colleges, "Integrity in the College Curriculum", Ibid, v. 29, no. 14 (Nov. 28, 1984), p. 16-21; and the Association of American Colleges, "Integrity in the College Curriculum", Ibid, v. 29, no. 22 (Feb. 13, 1985), p. 12-30.

3Elaine El-Khawas, Campus Trends, 1984, (American Council on Education, 1985).

4"Wave of Curriculum Change Sweeping American Colleges," New York Times, 10 March 1985, sec. 1, p. 1.